

# In Our Search for Knowledge and Wisdom

[Learning the Dhamma, Understanding It and Interpreting It]

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## General Introduction

In the days of old when people travelled more by road than by air or by rail, they had time to spare to stop on the highway and greet, and say hello to each other. This was more so if they travelled on foot. If these happy-go-lucky sort of way-farers of old took a liking to each other on meeting, not only would they say 'How do you do?' but they would also go further to comment and make personal inquiries. They would say 'You are an agreeable personality. What manner of philosophy do you uphold? Who, may I know, is your teacher?'

Here, in this kind of friendly and courteous inquiry, one directly gets an insight into the valuable role which a teacher was believed to play in the life of a pupil, whether he be a young man or even an older one, who chooses to have a teacher for his own benefit. One owes one's entire knowledge-build-up [what one has heard = *bāhusacca*] to one's teacher. The Buddha, soon after his enlightenment, tells an inquiring wandering ascetic Upaka that '**all what he knows was self-acquired and that therefore he had none other to point out as a teacher - *sayam abhiññāya kaṃ uddiseyyam.***

A teacher, it is assumed, completely guides a pupil in preparation for life. In the *catur āsrama dharma* [or *Vaṃa āsrama dharma*] of the ancient Indians, the period of *brahmacarya* took good care of this teacher-pupil relationship. The teacher makes the pupil a new man. That is why the teacher, specially in the Buddhist monastic community, is called upon to play the role of *in loco parentis* [*putta-cittam upatthapetvā*] towards his pupil. It is this broad-based, multi-faceted role of teacher that is glorified in calling the Buddha **the teacher of gods and men** or *satthā devamanussānaṃ Buddho Bhagavā ' ti.*

## Learning the Dhamma

One of the verbs regularly used in Pali for learning is *pariyāpuṇāti*. The noun we derive from this verb for learning is *pariyatti*. In speaking of Buddhism as a **comprehensive religious or spiritual organization** or *sāsana*, we divide it into three different areas and recognize the first of these as **1. the stage of learning** or *pariyatti sāsana*. The other two are **2. the personal practice or living of what has been learnt** [or *paṭipatti*], there being no learning apart from living and **3. the personal experience of the benefits thereof**, i.e. the fruition or realization [or *paṭivedha*].

There has to be the **sincere motive for learning** the Dhamma as stated above, i.e. for the purpose of living it and thereby put one's life in correct alignment [*dhammānudhamma-patipanno*] to make an end of suffering. Learning can also be just misdirected towards being pedantic, merely for the sake of arguing and debating with others [*Ekacce moghapurisā dhammaṃ pariyāpuṇanti suttaṃ geyyaṃ ...*]. Such situations are envisaged very early in the history of the Sāsana, as recorded in the Parable of the Snake of the Majjhima Nikaya [Alagaddūpama Sutta]. This self same Sutta, it must be stated here and now, is also very emphatic about the utilitarianism, i.e. the **religious usefulness of sutta learning**.

The Buddha clearly states that he preaches the Dhamma, comparable to a raft, as a means of **getting one across the vast ocean or flood of Saṃsāra** = *samsārogha* [*Kullūpamaṃ vo bhikkhave dhammaṃ desissāmi nittharaṇatthāya no gahaṇatthāya*]. Once the Dhamma has served its purpose, it is to be dispensed with [*Dhammā 'pi pahātabbā pageva adhammā*]. Dhamma serves the purpose of indicating the direction of the entire religious life which every adherent must seriously undertake to follow. That is why the Thera Sariputta, very meaningfully and very correctly, defines the very **first step** or **the entry point** of the **Buddhist Noble Eight fold Path** or *sammā-diṭṭhi* as the acquisition of the knowledge of the Dhamma, defining it as *āgato imaṃ saddhamman 'ti*.

Without this pre-requisite or basic initiation, there can be no pursuit of the path. It is this **basic knowledge of the Dhamma** in *sammā-dit̥ṭhi* which helps to determine the **structuring of Buddhist thinking** or *sammā saṅkappa* as the second item of the Path [coming in the wake of *sammā-dit̥ṭhi*]. We are inclined to stress here that the eight stages of the Eight fold Path are **normally successive and sequential from the first to the eighth**. In fact, **it is only journeying thereafter, through a ninth and a tenth, that one is led to the final attainment of arahant hood**. It is only within such an approved ground plan that Buddhist life activities of *vācā kammanto ājīvo* would become *sammā* or acceptably Buddhist.

Understanding what learning means: in terms of attha and dhamma

There is perfect clarification with regard to the purpose of learning the Dhamma. Very briefly stated, this learning comes directly from hearing the Buddha, i.e. listening to him as he preached. Note the Pali where it says: *Tathāgato loka uppajjati araham̐ sammāsambuddho. So dhammam̐ deseti ... Tam̐ dhammam̐ sutvā tathāgate saddham̐ paṭilabhati*. What is described here has already witnessed the completion of the allied processes of learning the teaching, comprehending it and gaining the conviction about it.

Immediately after this, is added the action part of the religious life or the individual opting to live it. So the suttas immediately add that the convert decides to leave the household life and take to a life of *pabbajjā* [*Yannūnā 'ham̐ agāasmā anagāriyam̐ pabbajeyyan 'tī*]. We have already indicated above that this was **for the attainment of the Buddhist goal of release from Saṃsāra**. On the other hand, there was adequate warning issued that mishandling the learning of Dhamma would almost be like trying to catch a snake at its tail end. The snake would swing round and sting to death the reckless handler, says the Parable of the Snake [Alagaddūpama Sutta].

What we are talking of to-day as Dhamma is the version of Buddhist literature preserved in the Pali language. There is a general agreement that this may approximate to the oldest version, as a whole, of what the Buddha taught

during his life time of forty-five years. This bulk, the Buddha himself introduces as the **Dhamma** and the **Vinaya** [*Yo vo mayā Ananda dhammo ca vinayo ca desito paññatto*] which he said is good and competent enough to guide his disciples after his death - *so vo maccayena satthā*. [Mahāparinibbāna Sutta DN. II.154]. To whichever tradition one belongs, the Theravada or the Mahayana, or wherever one's loyalties are, with the Pali or Sanskrit or any other school of Buddhist literature, one cannot afford to ignore these early literary records.

Many other versions of Buddhist texts, preserved in Sanskrit, Chinese and other languages, also claim at times to be the original teachings delivered by the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, but not made available to the world, for various reasons, at the time of their proclamation. That subject is to be questioned and discussed elsewhere.

Also in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta referred to above [op. cit. 124], the Buddha points out Four Great Authorities [*Cattāro mahāpadesā*] whom the later generations may quote as authorities in their presentation of the Buddha's teaching. Unwilling to accept and endorse them as such, the Buddha once again falls back on the **Sutta** [= **Dhamma**] and the **Vinaya** as the true norms of judgement [*Sutte otāretabbāni Vinaye sandassetabbāni*].

Getting back to our theme of learning the Dhamma, it must be stressed that this learning must be equally well followed by an accurate understanding of the meaning [*atthaṃ ājāneyya*] of what has been learnt, i.e. in terms of the language in which it is conveyed. This is a language-wise requirement, that words must convey common specific meanings to all who handle the texts in that language. Grammatical structures are to be equally well respected. Different forms of words and different ways of expression have not only different stresses but sometimes completely different meanings.

This is where complete and thorough mastery of practical grammar becomes indispensably essential for a correct and thorough understanding of the Dhamma, primarily for oneself and by oneself. There is also, at the same time,

the paramount need for a reliable transmission of a tradition. Over the decades, and almost throughout the whole of the last century, we have witnessed with alarm the extent of damage done to serious Buddhist studies [in both fields of religion and philosophy as well as history and social sciences] through incorrect translations.

Our computerized records of such mistakes keep voluminosely increasing, day after day. These are sometimes innocently but at others, even arrogantly and pompously doled out. It is calamitous that, even in the world of serious scholarship, they often continue to go undetected. Is there any serious ethic, may we humbly ask, in the world of Buddhist scholarship for this silence and this non-concern about these near-fatal accidents, to detect, indicate and talk about them?

Wrapped up within the word-meaning [*attha*] is also the vital component of the teaching, i.e. its spirit [*dhamma*]. Through misunderstanding of the import of the Dhamma [*attanā duggahitena*], **disciples would often misrepresent the Master and expose him to ridicule and accusation by non-believing contemporaries** [*bhagavantam abbhācikkheyya*]. It would be considered a serious offense [*Na hi sādhu bhagavato abbhakkhānaṃ*]. We discover that this did happen even during the brief spell of forty-five years of the Master's work-life.

During the life time of the Master, such situations were immediately brought to his notice by fellow monks who had adequate conviction about the teaching they were following and about which there was a general degree of consensus. The **Buddha would then immediately summon the miscreants and verify with them the allegation and probe into the why and the wherefore of the distortion.** The story of Aritṭha, the Vulture-trapper [*Gaddha-bādhi-pubba*] is one good example. He held the belief that **what the Buddha preached as to the evil results of the gratification of sensual pleasures [*kāmā*] is not really so.**

The Buddha sends for Aritṭha, and not only questions him with regard to the origin of his incorrect understanding of the Buddha's word, but explains over

again in detail his exposition with regard to sensual pleasures. Literally, **the Buddha nails the lie to the counter. As the living Master, he had to do it. He gets the disciples to authenticate the correctness of the Dhamma as propounded by him.** Ariṭṭha is publicly **declared a complete failure with regard to his comprehension of the message of Buddhism** [*...na usmīkato imasmiṃ dhammavinaye*].

An equally serious misunderstanding of the Dhamma with regard to the nature of *viññāṇa* as **the transmigratory Consciousness** occurs to Bhikkhu Sāti as recorded in the Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta [*Tadev ' idaṃ viññāṇaṃ sandhāvati saṃsarati anaññan ' ti* = That this **self-same consciousness**, and **not another**, passes on from one life to another.]. Here too, the Buddha himself steps in to correct the error and he clarifies the Buddhist position, relentlessly rejecting the misunderstanding.

An equally powerful vindication of the Buddhist position with regard to the Buddhist **no-soul theory** is very clearly stated in the Alagaddūpama Sutta to which we have already referred to above. The Buddha argues in it as follows. " When one cannot, well and truly, find anything which can be identified as **a self** or any thing as **belonging to a self**, is it not **totally foolish to speak about** such a thing as ' **This is mine** ' or as ' **This I am** ' or ' **This is my self** '?"

With his disciples, **the Buddha finds unanimous agreement on this.** Herein one finds an unequivocal rejection of the **soul-theory** *in toto*. In the world of Buddhist scholarship, one still finds good students of Buddhism who endeavour to see a veiled phantom of a self or soul beneath and behind *anatta*. This goes even as far back as Miss. I. B. Horner and Ananda Coomaraswamy [See their joint production in **Gotama the Buddha**].

It is worth reproducing here the original Pali from the Majjhima Nikaya and see for ourselves how much leverage it gives for a **soul theory** in Buddhism:  
***Attani vā bhikkhave attaniye vā saccato thetato anupalabbhamāne nanā ' yaṃ paripūro bāla-dhammo evaṃ taṃ samanupassitun etaṃ mama eso ' hamasmi***

*eso me attā ' ti.*

This, I believe is indeed a very good point at which to leave you to start again yourselves to **Set rolling the Wheel of the Dhamma.**

And as the Buddha said to Sariputta:

Thus O Sariputta, you shall keep rolling  
the supreme wheel of the law which I have set in motion  
**Evaṃ eva kho tvaṃ Sariputta mayā anuttaraṃ dhammacakkaṃ  
pavattitam sammadeva anuppavattesi. SN. 191**

